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LANGUAGE, CULTURE, AND PERSONALITY

Essays in Memory of Edward Sapir

OBD

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ATTITUDES TOWARD FOOD AND HUNGER IN ALOR

By CORA DU BOIS

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DR. SAPIR'S great respect for the subtlety and complexity of human beings acted as a sobering influence on the growing interest of anthropologists in psychology and upon the contributions they made to social psychology. As an anthropologist he minimized in no way the tremendous power of society in shaping people but he never permitted his interests as a social scientist to blind him to the infinite variety of individuals within a culture. He went even further and in conversation, at least, would support the probability of innate personality types. This sound caution against the environmentalists' inclination to overvalue conditioning was a great advantage to his students. At the same time he laid full stress on studying the acculturation of the child.

It seems possible to combine these two principles in a preliminary and tentative fashion by making certain assumptions, following certain methods of reasoning and thereby arriving at certain generalizations about people within a given cultural framework, without at any time denying that the processes and symbols are going to have tremendously different values in the total economy of the individuals involved. It is with this in mind that I should like to discuss attitudes developed toward food and hunger in a particular culture.

It can be reasonably assumed that all human beings have certain physiologically determined tensions. One of the most obvious of these is hunger. But nowhere do human beings discharge this or any other basic tension directly. All societies have devices whereby such tensions are delayed, redirected, and often elaborated. To acquire these devices children everywhere must be subject to disciplines. Such disciplines may be of various types and undoubtedly the question deserves close comparative study. For our purposes it will suffice to point out that they may be permissive, restrictive, or absorptive. By permissive disciplines are meant those by which children are encouraged to acquire certain behaviors through a variety of immediate or delayed rewards. By restrictive disciplines are meant those which definitely deny the child certain types of activity by punishments ranging from physical violence to withdrawal of approval. The absorptive disciplines are those not consciously imparted, as are the permissive and restrictive, but rather those behavior patterns so consistently observed in other members of the group that the child acquires them by a kind of psychic osmosis.

It is important to stress that a single discipline of childhood or a single traumatic experience is rarely sufficient in itself to set cultural personality types. Repeated experiences in different behavioral, value, and institutional contexts alone will create personality constellations of such force and consistency that they may become apparent to ethnologists who,

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with the best will in the world, can never have more than a superficial insight into peoples of an alien culture.[1]

Lastly, there is so far no very definite knowledge of what ego mechanisms will be employed by the individual in reacting to frustrations associated with different kinds of disciplines and discipliners. However, from the psychoanalysts and the psychiatrists there is a growing insight into personality processes like projection, introjection, sublimation, and so on. I assume these processes to be universal to mankind, although I should expect variations in weighting from culture to culture.[2]

The procedure, therefore, is to consider a basic physiological tension, see how it is acted upon by disciplines of childhood, what repetitions it finds in a variety of contexts and how it is crystallized by (or into) institutional behavior through those personality mechanisms I have assumed to be universal to mankind.

Hunger, as one of the basic and obvious tensions of human beings, everywhere subject to delayed, redirected, and elaborated gratifications, suggests itself as a point of departure for testing the procedure outlined above. The people used for this purpose are the Atimelang, who belong to a cluster of five mountain villages on the island of Alor in the Netherlands East Indies.[3]

The experiences of the Atimelang child with hunger and food are to be considered first. Immediately after birth the mother takes the child in her arms and offers it the breast to suckle at will. From four to six days after birth the mother remains in the house with the infant rather constantly in her arms. When the umbilical cord has dried and dropped off, the mother and child leave the house for the first time and from then onward the child is offered in addition to its mother's milk many different kinds of premasticated foods and vegetable gruels. Any refusal of the child to nurse freely and frequently when opportunity offers during this first period of life is considered a serious symptom of ill health and gives rise to considerable concern in parents. After the first week the child is given adult diet as fast as it will take it, and a child of about eighteen months can often be seen at a feast alternately nursing and sucking a cube of boiled pork fat.

Since, however, women are primarily responsible for garden work and the subsistence economy of the Atimelangers, they return to regular field work often ten days to two weeks after the birth of a child. It is not customary for the mother to work with the child on her back or even near her, as it is in some societies, so the infant is left at home in the care of some kin, usually the father or older sibling. There is great variation in solicitude and effectiveness of feeding care received by infants from these substitute mothers. Also some wom-

[1] I am indebted to Dr A. Kardiner and some of his colleagues for their insistence on the need of repetition in many contexts to set certain personality trends.

[2] For a discussion of these mechanisms see Anna Freud, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence* (London, 1937).

[3] The material used in this article was collected by the writer during eighteen months of residence on the island of Alor, extending from January 1938 through June 1939. Acknowledgments are gratefully made to the Social Science Research Council of Columbia University and to Dr A. Kardiner who made this work possible.

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en have greater responsibilities than others in the number they must provide for and are therefore more pressed by field work. On the other hand some women may have given birth during the middle of the dry season when labor in the fields is slack. Still others may be lazy about gardening. As a result some infants receive more care and food during the first months of life. If an infant is left in the hands of a father or sibling, it is going to be fairly hungry part of that time. The person caring for the child may give it gruel or premasticated food more or less conscientiously, but to judge from the frequency with which infants spew out such nourishment, one may suggest that such feeding is not very effective or satisfactory. One repeatedly sees infants trying to nurse at the breast of a father or immature sibling only to be pushed away with an attitude of mild embarrassment.

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Rāpeda told an anecdote of his childhood which reveals both the frustration infants may suffer from this type of feeding as well as the older sibling's frequent resentment of the role of nurse maid.

> Once mother and I were living in a field house near our gardens. She told me to carry Sivamani [younger brother] while she worked. At noon he was hungry and wanted to nurse. I gave him food but he only wanted it. He cried and cried and wouldn't stop. I cried too. Finally I went and told mother to come and nurse him but she wouldn't. So I took Sivamani, laid him down on a mat in the house and ran off to Pēdaing. There from the ridge I shouted, "Mother, your child lies in the house. If you want to care for it, good. If you don't want to, that is also good. I am going to Attawlong to play."

The point to be made is that even during infancy, where children are quite generally delighted-in, and when they are rarely out of someone's arms, or at least someone's carrying shawl, gratification of hunger is frequently a disappointing experience. Feeding is irregular; intervals between nursing are so long that acute hunger may arise with either no means of gratifying it or gratification is offered in foods obviously less satisfactory than that which the mother offers. When the mother is home and not too busy, she will offer the child the breast whenever it is restless. However, I never heard any woman speak of the pleasure of nursing, which probably means no more than that the culture has not maximized this particular physical pleasure. Women, when asked, did generally say that they preferred child bearing to intercourse but almost invariably added, "Because children will give me funeral feasts." There were several women who said that they did not wish any more children because feeding them meant so much work. Economic organization, therefore, acts directly upon attitudes toward children and conditions the child's earliest experiences in respect to food in this society.

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In Attawlong, therefore, the hunger tension of infants is not maximally met as in other societies where children are constantly in contact with their mothers and where the pattern of nursing is a consciously fostered gratification of both mother and child.

A still more serious feeding problem may arise when the child begins to walk, approximately between the thirteenth and eighteenth months. By the time it can manage to get about alone, it is left to play near the house or on the dance place in the center of the village.

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An older sibling, real or classificatory, or an old woman may be near and will care for a whole group of children in a desultory fashion but no one is responsible for feeding the child and no one is greatly inconvenienced by his crying. When the mother goes off to work, the child is left from about eight in the morning until five in the afternoon without regular provision of food. This does not mean that he is left entirely without food, but that all he gets during that time may be odd bits an older child stoles more or less willingly and grudgingly to him when he begs for it. Again, of course, there is marked variation in children's experiences during this period. They may have a solicitous older sister who can be spared from field work and who will provide relatively good care. There may be a grandmother who works less hard and frequently in the gardens. But, in any case, after the child learns to walk, his frustrations with respect to hunger are increased, and simultaneously he loses the constant handling and support he had during the first stage of life in the carrying shawl. That the acquisition of his first skill in the independent mastery of the outer world, i.e. walking, should be associated with two severe deprivations may well have larger personality repercussions in the realm of ego development than there is space to consider in this paper.

To add to the strain of this period and to reinforce it further, the weaning of the child may be hastened at this time because another sibling is expected. Rarely does one see a child of three or four still nursing. Although weaning is done simply by pushing the child away gently or placing the breast beyond its reach, there is no doubt that difficulties accumulate at this stage of development. Anal training, walking, and talking have not yet been deliberately instituted. They are allowed to take their own course. In other words, the child has acquired few skills during the first two or three years of life. Those which he has acquired have been by means of restrictive or aversive disciplines. It is not surprising that this is the time par excellence of temper tantrums. These continue, as might be expected, with marked individual variations up to the age of five to eight. Adult reactions to children's tantrums are characterized by great inconsistency. One day a mother will ignore the child; the next she may be irritated and strike it; on still another occasion she may deceive it into thinking she is not observing it, only to slip away when the child has been diverted; or on still other occasions, especially at night, the child may be threatened with the local bogy-man who, incidentally, is not a very fearsome figure. In addition there to their inconsistency, all active disciplines are of the restrictive type. I have never seen a mother promise a child a reward for being good and then keep her promise.

A clear example of the needs of early childhood and the uncertainties of the persons on whom the child depends for its gratifications is found in a series of [illegible] contained in Tilapuda's autobiography. She tells of caring for a younger sister called Ishikomai.

> On the way [to the field] Ishikomai cried a lot, so I put her down and slapped her. Then I talked nicely to her and we went on when she was quiet. . . . When Ishikomai was a little older, she would cry to go to the fields with me. If I were not angry with her, I would take her along with me to dig sweet potatoes. I would give her the big ones and keep the small ones. She was always saying, She cried to be fed, she cried to go places. I hit her on the head with my knuckles and then I would feed her. She cried because she was hungry.

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The inconsistent and restrictive quality of discipline which pervades the child's life might well be expected to breed in it a sense of insecurity and suspicious distrust. It has at its disposal only one weapon with which to meet frustration and that is rage. The alternative idea of being good in order to gain one's ends is not presented to the child. But that rage is an ineffectual weapon is learned at very latest during the first decade of life.

While the child is discovering the futility of protest, he is also discovering his own resources. He may expect his mother to prepare a morning meal at about seven o'clock and another at about the same time in the evening. During the intervening twelve hours he learns to forage for himself. He learns this from five or six onward in the fluid play groups of free roving children. Remnants may be scraped from the cooking pot. A variety of insects usually spurned by adults can be found. In the fields near the village are mangoes, bananas, sweet potatoes, young corn, and squash. They can be eaten raw or easily cooked. As a rule adults do not object to the minor depredations of their own children or their playmates, but if the raiding is too constant or if the crop is scarce, children may be scolded for it. Such objections are most apt to be voiced when children are reaching the age at which their labor might be expected and is not forthcoming. There are several anecdotes of reproaches on this score, and in one instance a mother and half-grown son came to blows over the matter. But an additional factor in adult objections to children using garden crops too freely is that it may actually disrupt friendships between age-mates. Mangaia, in his autobiography, gives several such anecdotes, one of which is quoted below.

Maninuki said, "Let us go to the fields to dig sweet potatoes." My mother and father were away and I was hungry. For a month we played together going every day to dig sweet potatoes. But his mother was angry because we went to her garden to dig them. So after that day we always went to my garden to dig them. Then my potatoes were finished. I was angry because we always went to my garden. I said to him, "You have lots of potatoes but we only went once to your garden and your mother was angry. Now you have many and you can't come to dig mine any more." I splashed water on him. Maninuki said we would not play together any more.

Parental objections also pave the way for the thieving in which play groups of boys frequently indulge. The whole system of feeding reinforces one of the marked concomitant tensions centering on theft and fear of theft.

During this preadolescent play period boys may get occasional meals as guests. When an adult male visits a house in which a woman is at home, it is customary to set a calabash of food before him and any little boys who are about are invited to join him. Little boys very soon learn to attach themselves to any man who seems to be setting out on a "business" trip and in this way unobtrusively learn a great deal of the role expected of them as adults. Hunger is a motivation which leads to the acquisition of adult male skills. Little girls are not fed on this occasions, except rarely when they pick up a bit of food on the side while it is being prepared. There are still other sources of food available to small boys. During feasts those who help with the butchering are given the entrails or other less desirable bits of the pig to roast on the spot. Rat hunting, in which several boys assist a grown man or two, is another

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CONSTRUCTIONS FROM THE WIFE'S FAMILY IN A SOVIET PLANT

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source of food. The nuts are often roasted on the spot, and the children are given the hollow, 155
outside, and other less choice portions of the kill. In any event the day's food is so present- 857
ously and inconsistently procured as discipline is administered. Further, the food received is 855
the less choice kind which may, in conjunction with many other attitudes, help to produce
in the child, the feeling of being undervalued.

As compared with this free play group period for boys, there is a slightly different sit- 155
uation for girls. Their play period is neither as long nor as free. They are more closely re- 856
stricted to their mothers, have more rigorous training in their adult role as providers for the 855
family. They go out to work in the fields with their mothers and have therefore more regular 562
access to food. I know of no cases in which little girls have been accused of pilfering from
gardens, whereas such charges give rise to frequent if minor frictions with boys. On the other
hand a girl does not have the great privilege of the small boy. She gets no tidbits during
butchering unless an unusually indulgent and thoughtful male kin happens to notice her on
the edge of the group and gives her a bit of meat. Similarly, the meat at feasts is always dis- [574]
tributed to the women but only in terms of the males in their households. That is, women get
meat for their husbands and sons, but not for themselves or their daughters. Since food is
taken home and eaten there, the women naturally get a share, but only as dependents of
men. Also, since meat is eaten only in connection with a feast and is definitely a "treat," it
becomes set in the children's minds as a symbol of masculine prestige. This coincides with [862]
theories of property which grant men the ownership of all feasts food as opposed to women
who own the vegetable foods. The system of meat distribution at feasts helps to reinforce
early in life and on a very basic level the role of masculine prestige in the culture. It is not
that men are the providers; in fact they are quite the contrary. They are the ones provided
for; yet they are the purveyors of a delicacy.

The girl, then is not during the preadolescent years in the essential and intimate relation- 155
ship to the food cycle which she will follow all her life. Further, she has more systematic and 562
deliberate training than boys in the role of adult existence. There is no sharp break in her life 86
except the change of residence at marriage. It is significant that only after marriage is she al- [886]
lowed to make, independently of her mother, a food contribution to a feast. Public food con-
tributions are the symbol of female adulthood.

Boys find themselves undervalued in comparison to men. Girls are valued in much the 155
same terms as the adult women. Their role will always be somewhat underprivileged, but at 562
least they do not experience the same marked discrepancy between childhood and the adult
role expected of them as the boys do. The adolescent boy has a sudden adjustment to make [981]
and there are no crisis rites, no initiation ceremonies to help him. His change is not institu-
tionalized or dramatized, and certainly he gets no direct education in it. At about fifteen he
begins to ponder the problems of a wife and that means entering upon the whole complex &
essential game which is the man's chief labor and honorific occupation. In the course of a few
months he drifts away from the play groups, becomes a much more solitary figure, and inter-
estingly enough often trades at this time on a pathetic motif, even if he must cook for himself.

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There needs a day in the symbol of childhood. It is significant that food as a motive symbol should be used at the time that adult sex drives and financial responsibilities first become pressing.

This situation at the end of a long series of childhood experiences gradually helps to set the wife as a mother figure. The wife, like the mother, is the responsible provider of food. A high degree of identification between the parent-child and husband-wife relation is actually formalized and valued in the culture. When older men instruct a young couple who have quarrelled, they invariably tell the young woman that she should be a mother to her husband and tell the young man that he should be a father to his wife. One of the strongest expressions of this sentiment was given by a young informant who may have made the identification a little more strongly than was customary.

When we like our mothers. When we were small our mothers fed us. When we are grown our wives cook for us. If there is something good, they keep it in the pot until we come home. When we were small we slept with our mothers; when we are grown we sleep with our wives. Sometimes when we are grown we wake in the night and call our wives "mother."

The mother is definitely the provider boy, as we have seen, she is an essential one in many cases. It is not surprising therefore to find the relationship between spouses a permanent and unbreakable one. Even though the whole weight of the matrilineal kinship system acts to stabilize marriages, divorce-lengths average approximately 1.5 divorces apiece. This means a high average where one considers the elaborate and cumbersome ceremony required for divorce.

So far I have been concerned with sketching briefly some of the larger experiences of childhood, the emotional reactions characteristic of adults, and the devices through which the culture somewhat negatively permits children to satisfy their basic needs. There has been some indication how all of these affect human relationships. I should like to turn now to a series of institutionalized food attitudes and behaviors.

The less and more striking a condition, which is a matter of almost daily experience, representing practically all relationships to the supernatural. The word for another person literally "to feed," and every supernatural object is an elemental. Individual and village tutelary spirits, the graves of the dead, the spirits of sorcerers who have exhibited a fetid, invisible, belonging supernaturals, are all given their share of chicken blood, rice, and pig meat. Rather chiefly enough, the offering is small and purely symbolic. The bulk of the sacrificial food is consumed by the people. In myths the sky heroes are always fed rice, millet, and eggs. Their reincarnation is achieved by pouring a pot of millet over their heads. The building of large houses must be accompanied by feasts at every stage of construction, and its importance is proportional to the number of pigs slaughtered in the course of building it. Newly purchased gongs or magical music be fed. It is, in fact, difficult to find any aspect of religious and social ceremonial which does not involve "feeding." In this connection it is not without significance

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...some thoroughfares believable to the concept of man's creation from reddish clay. In Atimelang this widespread motif is phrased so that man is created from reddish clay and more exactly, that is, man is made from land.

Alor land, unlike those native commodities, is generally considered adequate pay for labor. The guest workers who help cultivate a large rice field, who assist in erecting a lineage house, who attend ceremonial funeral ceremonies, or who participate in similar communal activities are all fed in return for their participation. Where cooperative groups are formed for work in fields, the host of the day must furnish the midday meal.

There are other activities toward land which are perhaps less dramatic and therefore overlooked, but just as telling. If women are pounding rice or corn, any kernel which falls from the mortar is carefully picked up. Children of five or six have already observed this ritual and are as meticulous as the adults of both sexes. A single bean left in a pod during shelling will be retrieved by children as well as adults. In clearing ground even unburned land plants will be carefully preserved. The meticulous fashion in which all food articles are saved and used does not coincide with any natural scarcity.

The natives also refer frequently to the annual "hungry period." This is the end of the dry season when there is no natural water but only low of the preferred foods. For a month or two natives depend more on camotes and sweet potatoes than on corn. To the culture planners this is a period of food stress. In addition there were references to periods of famine as though they were an ever present threat. Careful inquiry revealed only two periods of shortage within the memories of people between forty and fifty. Both of these were due to famine which had disorganized the community so that for one season the fields had not been adequately planted and as carefully weeded as is necessary. There is no doubt that food, especially of the preferred sort, was scarce on these two occasions, but it was procurable by purchase in nearby communities and there is no evidence that anyone died of hunger. There is, in fact, no indication that hunger is ever necessary if a proper amount of foresight and industry has been exercised. Perhaps one of the best indications that the concern over food scarcity is of psychological origin and not evidence in that there is no food hunger. No one ever expresses poverty or wealth in terms of land, although there is usually great variation between consumption units in the number and kinship of kids owned. This is an important growing preoccupation with wealth as scarce in the culture. Land, on the yield of the fields in shares that crops are good and on the whole adequate was only to feed the consumption units but also to provide surpluses for contributions to feasts.

In addition there is a singular agricultural lexicon in Alor. This concerns the so-called "good years" and "bad years" which seem to alternate evenly. Theory has it that there is no use planting rice fields or any enduring plots during "bad years" because rodents will eat up the crop before it can be harvested. In the "good years" there are supposed to be fewer rats and there is a chance to lay in surpluses for large feasts. The theory of alternating years of rat plagues has no basis in reality. Essentially the idea is a native that every other year one has the helpless illusion of dependence on poor land supply. As one might expect, there are

a few people who ignore the theory and place some corn fields or even construct rice fields showing "our power." For the social forces seem almost a personification of basic food attitudes in the individual. It appears to be almost an expression of infantile dependence and help lessness. However, it is only with the utmost caution that I would suggest in any particular case that individual psychology is the direct source of an institutionalized form.

Theft and fear of theft are manifold phenomena whose implications extend beyond their significance as food, but the most common type of theft is from gardens. This may be explained on two bases: one is the early theft habits of foraging play groups of boys, the other is that food is one of the few types of property which cannot be absolutely identified and which can be used without much fear of detection. For these reasons, perhaps, one sees the use of names against theft completely used frequently in fields. These names, made by specialists, are luminous paint discs whose cloth tags are reserved the temporary combinations of supplied objects. They are erected in fields where theft has occurred or where the owner fears such an occurrence. Once there, they are supposed to work automatically. A thief would develop leprosy or some other fatal or debilitating illness, and even the object would call the specialist to remove the name before harvesting the field. Although these names are widely used, they seem actually to engender very little fear among most people. Certainly they in no way effectively stop pilfering. Many people are more realistic in the face of dependence and keep armed guard on their fields. A third sought in the air runs the risk not only of losing to pay a fine but also of losing debt.

Another important food attitude is shown by the limited range of generosity in the exhausting it. An occasional guest is fed, but even enough suppose who is obviously scrounging has no longer asked to eat. In case a family runs short of corn or rice it has to buy or borrow from those who may have a surplus. But if food is borrowed, it is in case of pressure running as high as one hundred percent. This holds even between brothers. Thus Panawi received a hundred-ear corn bundle. He got it from his brother but had to repay it at harvest time with two ears bundles of the same size. Even traders, which at first blush appear to be generous food distributors, are far from lavish in quantity. Each female guest brings to the host a contribution of food. Everything brought by guests is pooled with the hosts' contributions and then redistributed on that women may carry back home but little more than they brought in the first place. Of course they do receive more in addition, but even after the most cursory of only three or four cubes of boiled pork about two inches square. However, the quantities displayed are considerable and the home-drive satisfaction there from.

I have been concerned with describing a series of childhood experiences and a series of institutionalized adult food attitudes. The experiences of individual children with respect to hunger gratifications and discipline vary greatly; it is to be expected, therefore, that in adults these cultural attitudes toward food will vary in "the depth or shallowness of meaning in the individual's total economy." Mungano began his autobiography with early memories of a period of hunger, whereas Tikopia, who was the same age and of the same village, began the story of her childhood with quarrels between herself and other children.

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One man is conscientious and regular in making food contribute to his familial equities; another neglects them until those indebted to him suspend his contributions. I have been concerned not with an attempt to rationalize personality among Attimelangers but with an attempt to show how individual childhood experiences with respect to hunger find consistent outlets in institutionalized fields which reinforce early satisfactions and which perhaps may then invest with greater or lesser emotional energy.

Also, one must be careful not to see such total or exclusive causal sequences. I do not believe that the childhood food experiences of the Attimelangers have given rise to the system of sacrifice. They have merely reinforced and made significant to many individuals that wider general behavioristic system. I would suggest, however, that it would be very difficult to weed from sacrifice in Alor so long as its individual symbolic value can be so high. For example, a child who has learned that the gratification of hunger is a pleasurable and concrete thing may well become an adult who shows characteristic attitudes toward the means of food, or possibly if he were adults who already reveal these attitudes. He has learned as a child that food is hard to get, that it can be stolen, and he has had no positive training in being generous with it. In fact, the whole pattern of discipline has been weighted on the restrictive rather than permissive side. All these individual experiences are reinforced by being required in adult behaviors (descriptive disciplines) and thereby become widely exemplars that may have little relation to the reality of subsistence economy.

To avoid the possibility of simplistic interpretations, it must be stressed again that no single session like hunger and the habits associated with its gratification will explain either the reality of the culture or the dominant and stressed personality traits of its bearers. It will be only by examining the whole variety of such individual life experiences and correlating for the formalized and unformalized cultural correlates that any progress will be made, not only in defining more sharply the interaction of personality and culture, but also in elucidating the stability of particular and value systems. Institutions which may be connected with high emotional value because of patterns in child training are not the ones which can be lightly legislated out of existence. To abandon such institutions without altering much critical methods of education, may well produce serious social and personal disharmonies. The implications of these statements, if true, cannot be ignored by cultural administrators and legislators. It is possible that where we understand better our own culture we shall have learned that basic social changes of a non-disruptive nature must be anticipated in the early and intensive conditioning of children.

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